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Out-of-School Programs

Building After-School Islands of Expertise in “Wrestling Club”

Victor Sensenig

Young children often develop areas of deep and rich knowledge before they enter school or during their out-of-school time. Crowley and Jacobs (2002) call these areas “islands of expertise.” These islands emerge over weeks or even years. They are bolstered by repeated, increasingly sophisticated conversations with adults and are integrated into multiple family activities, such as museum visits or targeted television viewing. According to Crowley and Jacobs, the development of expertise has several conditions: “repeated exposure to domain-specific declarative knowledge, repeated practice in interpreting new content, making inferences to connect new knowledge to existing knowledge, and repeated conversations with others who share or want to support the same interest” (p. 337).

The concept of islands of expertise suggests that informal social activities can make significant contributions to academic development. In their homes and neighborhoods, children can accumulate substantial knowledge about academic disciplines. In particular, the knowledge accrued in advanced conversations can establish children’s familiarity with abstract themes that persists when their interest in an island fades. For example, a child’s fascination with dinosaurs may be displaced by another interest, but the knowledge of abstract themes related to the topic—such as a rudimentary notion of Big History or the logic of taxonomy—may remain. The knowledge networks, or schemas, built around these islands of expertise aid processes of remembering and classifying. Schema allow children to pay less attention to the structure of certain activities and more attention to content, such as when the drama of a baseball game emerges after one is familiar with the rules. When the information-processing load decreases, information acquisition accelerates. According to Neuman and Celano (2012), differential opportunity for children to pursue expertise is a major contributor to the knowledge gap between children from neighborhoods of poverty and children from neighborhoods of privilege.

The question of when and how children develop islands of expertise merits attention from educators because of these potential contributions to academic literacies. Crowley and Jacobs (2002) focus on the formation of islands of expertise at home, but the concept is useful in thinking about children’s opportunities for learning in other after-school settings. In considering what kind of nonschool institutional spaces and programs promote the formation of these islands, this paper examines a public library that channeled and enhanced children’s expertise through a program called Wrestling Club. It shows that by validating children’s interest in a nonacademic topic, librarians can motivate them to willingly take part in authentic reading and writing practices. The

paper also suggests how a high-interest subject such as professional wrestling can become a vehicle for academic development.

Wrestling Club

Wrestling Club met on the third Saturday of every month in the central public library of Reading, Pennsylvania, and was organized by one of the children’s librarians, Sam¹. I visited four programs over the course of my fieldwork for a larger project on literacy learning in public libraries. In this study, I used ethnographic techniques to gain a rich understanding of the library setting. I observed library programs as well as informal interactions between librarians and patrons, interviewed librarians and parents, and analyzed relevant documents. According to Spradley (1980), the essential core of ethnography is “concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand” (p. 5). In an ethnographic study, the researcher recruits informants who can teach about the culture, which Spradley defines as “the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior” (p. 5).

In 2010 the city of Reading’s poverty rate was over 40%, the highest of any American city (Tavernise, 2011). Only 25% of the city’s schools made adequate yearly progress in 2010 (i.e., met the targets for achievement set by the No Child Left Behind Act for reaching 100% proficiency by 2014), and many teaching positions were cut when federal stimulus money was discontinued (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2011). Almost 60% of the city’s nearly 90,000 residents were Hispanic, many of them of Puerto Rican descent (United States Census Bureau, 2011).

Most of the library’s story times—during which librarians typically read several picture books, prepared a simple craft for the children to complete, and often performed a puppet show—were



Figure 1: Promotional flyers for regular preschool story time (left) and Wrestling Club (right)

¹ This is a pseudonym.

for preschool age children and lasted half an hour. There was a novel club for 9- to 12-year-olds scheduled for Wednesday afternoons as well as a culture club and a chemistry club that met every month or two. Wrestling Club was scheduled for midday on Saturday and was held once a month (Figure 1).

The library struggled to generate attendance for some programs. Its preschool story times often had few participants—sometimes only one or two children—and in several of my observations, no one showed up at all. Wrestling Club was an exception. There were often 20 or more children at the regular meetings, and there was an audience of up to 300 when the club was visited by superstar professional wrestler Jeff Hardy. The regular Wrestling Club meetings were structured like a typical story time, with shared reading from a book, an opportunity to work on a craft, and interspersed activities like playing games or viewing DVDs of a televised match. In addition to having higher attendance, Wrestling Club often lasted three or four times longer than the other story time programs because of its elaborated conversations and more demanding crafts.

The librarians observed that many of the children who attended Wrestling Club did not otherwise visit the library. Recent funding reductions had decreased the library’s capacity to carry programs to outside settings, such as Head Start centers and women’s shelters, where there were many children from impoverished homes. Recognizing the disproportionate effects of these cuts, the library determined to create some more accessible children’s programs.

Sam, the creator of Wrestling Club, was one of three full-time children’s librarians at the main public library. Unlike the other two, who had come to their library work from jobs in early childhood education, she had studied journalism and then worked as a freelance reporter, covering “school board meetings and unfun things like that,” as she described them. She later started teaching creative writing and journalism at the local community college and enrolled in a graduate program in English literature with the goal of becoming a professor. However, Sam told me, “It didn’t work out because you can easily get a job to teach composition, but you can’t ever get tenure.” She then took a part-time job at the library. “It really fit and I really like it, fell into it, I guess,” she said. She described the club’s origin in this way:

One Saturday I had these two boys come in and follow me around as I put books away and talk about what they were doing that week, and the books they were reading, and what they saw on TV. As our staff numbers dwindled, I didn’t really have time to do this, so finally I gave them books to read and asked them to write down information on things that interested them. And they would. It was just strange that they would. I was getting them to do busy work and they’d do it. They’d write facts down for me. One time I said to one of the boys, “Go read this book about [well-known wrestler] the Undertaker. I need to know this, this, and this.” And he said, “Why?” And I said, “Because I’m starting a Wrestling Club.” It just came out, and I realized that he would come, that he would read this book on his own, and I thought it would be a good way to say, “OK, you need my attention. I’m going to give you an hour of my attention.” And the first time we did it I

was expecting just those two boys, but there was a big homeschooling family that came, and two other boys.

Wrestling Club generated and sustained participation, in part, because Sam shared the children’s interest in wrestling. According to Sam, “It’s easier to make a connection with a child over something like wrestling than Charlotte’s Web. But it also validates their interest. It shows that another adult cares about what they’re into.” In leading the program, though, she had to evolve from a casual fan to a “super fan.” She explained, “I have to know these things. I have to know more than what the big fans know so we can exchange something, have that conversation.” Her literature background was also evident in her approach to the program. According to Sam, the appeal of professional wrestling is based on its storytelling. In Wrestling Club, the children essentially engaged in narrative analysis. As Sam explained, “It’s the same sort of dramatic elements that make up a novel. Someone gets betrayed, and we get to talk about that. Is that something you would have done? There’s obviously a villain. It’s all there, everything that you’d want to talk about in a novel is there in a match.”

Learning about luchadores

One special event featured some luchadores. The crowd of 150 people who attended it ranged in age from 5 to 60 years old and included many Hispanic children. The children were seated on and around the central rug in the children’s room, while older family members sat in chairs around the rug area or stood against the wall. A grandfather of one of the children told me that he had gone to *lucha libre* (free fight) matches in his hometown in Mexico as a boy. The luchadore presentation provides an example of the array of concepts and the kinds of conversations that characterized these events.

The special guest, a professional wrestler named “Lightning” Mike Quackenbush, was accompanied by three other masked wrestlers from the independent CHIKARA league, Soldier Ant (Figure 2), Satyrne, and Dasher Hatfield. They sat in chairs on either side of Quackenbush, who told the audience that he was going to “do the easy version” of a talk about *lucha libre*.

The easy version lasted about half an hour.



Figure 2: Soldier Ant (used with permission from CHIKARA).

Quackenbush began by explaining that *lucha libre* is a Mexican version of professional wrestling and that the two styles are like “distant cousins.” It also has a different place in Mexican culture. He said, “Imagine Batman is real and a force for good. That’s how *luchadores* (*lucha libre* wrestlers) began to function in Mexican culture, like superheroes jumping into the real world.” It’s an art form, he told them, something beautiful.

He then talked about the history of *lucha libre* and of the mask as a symbol. The first masked wrestler performed in Paris in 1873. In 1932 Salvador Lutteroth saw professional wrestling in Texas and returned to Mexico to start the world’s first wrestling federation. One of the central characters was El Santo, who wore a silver cape and a mask with teardrop eyes. He had a 40-year career, appearing in comic books and movies. Quackenbush explained how “bet fights” work and how the losers are unmasked. Derived from the battle dress of ancient Aztec warriors, the masks symbolize the warrior’s defiance, and they are more important than the title belt. For some *luchadores*, an unmasking is often the end of a career; unmasking takes away the fighter’s powers.

He concluded by explaining that *lucha libre* has evolved and has been influenced by American professional wrestling, which has a global following and recruits many international stars. Rey Misterio Jr., a current star in the United States, started in *lucha libre* and brought its style and symbols into his American professional wrestling career. Quackenbush asked, “Anyone know Junior?” As far as I could see, every hand went up. The audience, including the children, had been playing very close attention. “How about Alberto Del Rio?” Again, every hand went up. Quackenbush explained, “He also came from *lucha libre*, but now in WWE he wrestles without a mask. As a *luchadore*, he had wrestled as Dos Caras, or ‘Two Faces.’” Quackenbush pulled out a box of masks, including Dos Caras’s green mask with a two-headed red eagle, and passed them around. The children and adults in the audience looked them over, recognizing many of the masks, and several people even tried one on. Quackenbush began to take questions: “What are the differences with the Japanese version of professional wrestling?” “How do wrestlers design their masks and who makes them?” “Why do they change their masks?” The question and answer period lasted for over 20 minutes, until Sam stepped in to close the program. Many of the participants stayed to have photos taken with the wrestlers.

The most striking characteristic of the event was the depth and range of the concepts employed in both the presentation and the subsequent interaction. The presentation began as an expansive history of wrestling and moved into an exposition of rituals and cross-cultural adaptations. The speaker had the rapt attention of the audience. By the end, it was also clear—as evidenced by the questions they asked and the questions they answered—that the children as well as the adults in the audience already knew a lot about the topic. Although I was receiving an introduction to the subject, most of the people who were present were adding to their already extensive knowledge or looking for an opportunity to demonstrate what they knew.

Anticipating the school language register

Islands of expertise are most often discussed in terms of the particular academic knowledge that they promote, and the facts that students retain certainly benefit their later reading comprehension and critical thinking in related areas (Willingham, 2009). Wrestling Club would seem to have little to offer in this respect because of its subject’s apparent lack of pertinence to the standard curriculum. However, the program had much in common with what Gee calls “informal specialist language lessons” (2007, p. 23). These lessons involve adults discussing topics in specialist domains that children develop a deep interest in, including popular culture topics. According to Gee, these lessons promote enhanced verbal abilities as children engage in intensive interactions with adults and enjoy sustained, cognitively challenging conversations.

To Gee (2007), becoming literate in school involves learning the school language register, which has particular features and rules for interaction, such as the use of discourse markers to show that one is “in the know.” Individuals’ acquisition of this register deepens their capacity to take advantage of the affordances, or learning opportunities, that will be offered in school. The protoforms of later school-based social languages can be developed through earlier socialization. As Gee writes, “Early preparation for these specialist varieties is essential. Otherwise, for many children it is as if the language of school has changed from English to Greek in the middle years and they have never taken any Greek” (p. 23).

Almost all children enter school with extensive language abilities based on rich oral language experiences, but success in school is predicated on exposure to school-based practices and genres, particularly specialist varieties of language. An event like the Wrestling Club presentation about luchadores featured one such highly specialized kind of language. The encyclopedic background knowledge and specialist vocabulary relied on in Wrestling Club interactions was not academic knowledge narrowly conceived, but the register of the talk had much in common with the registers of academic domains. Crucially, in Wrestling Club the children also encountered the register through their own deeply felt communicative needs.

Faces and heels

Unlike most of the library’s other story times, Wrestling Club was not advertised for a particular age group, and children from preschoolers to early teens participated in it. However, most of the children who came to Wrestling Club were about eight or nine years old. Several parents regularly observed from the periphery, not because they felt the need to regulate their children’s behavior, but seemingly out of personal interest.

Sitting in a chair at the bottom of the “Story Stairs,” a half-circle of carpeted steps, Sam typically began by reading out loud to the children from a children’s book that either told the story of a wrestler’s life or gave a dramatic account of a particular wrestling match. The library had an extensive selection of these books, and they appeared to have a healthy circulation. The purpose

of the reading was to answer some preselected questions. Sam created a cardboard poster with the questions and another with a pool of possible answers—cutout pictures of wrestlers, images, and phrases—taped to it. As Sam read from the book, children volunteered to move the answer pieces over to the appropriate space on the poster with the questions.

At the Wrestling Club meeting featuring the then world champion wrestler CM Punk, Sam read from a biographical children’s book, and the children took turns answering the questions shown in Figure 3. For instance, after she had read the first few pages, two of the children moved the figures of Rowdy Roddy Piper and Superfly Jimmy Snuka to the shaded space under the question “Who were Punk’s favorite wrestlers when he was young?” Another boy correctly answered the question about what CM Punk shouts when he enters the arena (“It’s clobberin’ time!”—a reference to the comic book character the Thing, one of the Fantastic Four).



Figure 3: Answer board from the CM Punk Wrestling Club event at Fleetwood

Although the reading time was focused on finding answers for Sam’s prepared questions, and the books she read were quite short, this segment of the program took over half an hour because of the talk it inspired. After reading about the submission move, the “Anaconda Vise,” Sam paused to explain that it involved gripping an opponent’s neck until he passed out. She showed the group a picture of this move and asked, “What’s the only way to get out?” One of the girls answered, “Tap out.” Sam asked, “What happens then?” “You lose the match,” a boy answered. Sam explained that a vise is a squeeze, and she reread the page from the book about how the wrestler CM Punk uses it. This passage also referred to a move called “GTS,” and she asked if anyone knew what that was. A boy said, “It means ‘Go to sleep.’” He explained that CM Punk uses that move as a finisher and that “it’s called the finisher because that’s all he needs to do.” Sam said, “That’s right, and that’s one of our next questions.” The boy then came forward to answer the question “What is Punk’s finisher?” Another boy began telling a story about seeing the move at a wrestling event, Raw, in Philadelphia.

Sam used a TV on a cart beside her chair to show DVDs to supplement the information from the books. The conversation in the Wrestling Club meeting featuring the wrestler Triple H was centered on his shifting “gimmicks,” or wrestling personas, which determine the wrestler’s appearance, moves, and role in the larger story lines. Sam pointed out that Triple H had changed his gimmick dramatically at several points in his career. According to the book, his first gimmick was Terra Ryzing, which was followed by Hunter Hearst Helmsley, a snooty “Connecticut blue blood.” Sam defined “blue blood,” and this opened a conversation about social class. She explained that this character thought he was better than the other wrestlers because of his money or education or family background. Then she showed them a clip of a wrestling match introduced by Hunter Hearst Helmsley dressed in a tuxedo, holding a pipe and saying, “It’s high time for these wrestlers to learn a lesson in class. I’ll show them how to be a gentleman.” Sam explained that Triple H had started out as a “heel,” and asked, “Do any of you know what a heel is?” One of the boys said, “That’s a bad guy.” Sam asked, “What’s a good guy called?” The boy raised his hand and said, “Babyface.” Another boy added, “And we say ‘face.’” Sam noted, “Isn’t it interesting that Triple H was a heel before he was a face?” Several of the children spoke up with other examples of wrestlers who had changed their gimmicks from faces to heels. Sam observed that some of the most popular wrestlers were considered heels. She asked why people might like heels, and one boy answered that some of them had good moves.

This kind of interaction followed almost every topic covered during the shared reading. The librarian and the children defined terms, added information, and told personal stories of matches they had seen on TV or attended. The children, and occasionally even the parents, readily answered Sam’s questions and expanded on them. Sam listened carefully to what the children said and responded directly.

Parsing the Pepsi logo

The game and the craft that followed the shared reading also featured rich interactions and meaningful tasks with immediate rewards. After the book reading at the CM Punk event, Sam said it was time for the game. She handed out sheets of construction paper with colored photos of tattoos pasted on them. The tattoos, she said, were from different parts of CM Punk’s body, including his chest, back, upper arms, forearms, and hands. After the sheets were distributed, with several children sharing each one, she called out questions, such as “Who has the Pepsi logo?” One boy said he had it on the photo of the wrestler’s shoulder. Sam told them that in CM Punk’s college fraternity, his friends got tattoos of beer logos, so he got one of Pepsi. She explained that CM Punk doesn’t drink alcohol or do drugs and that the Pepsi logo symbolizes his “straight edge” persona. Sam pointed out the words “DRUG FREE” tattooed across CM Punk’s fingers. Then she asked, “Who has the ‘No gimmicks needed’ tattoo?” After one of the children identified it, Sam explained that it was for CM Punk’s friend who had died and that it represented the idea of wrestlers being themselves, rather than exaggerated characters. After the tattoo of the dice was

located, Sam told the children that one of the things CM Punk often says is that luck is for losers and that you have to make your own luck by working. Then she pointed out a koi fish tattoo, which she said was for good luck. One of the boys spoke up, “I thought he didn’t believe in luck.” Sam said, “Yeah, isn’t that strange? He says luck is for losers, but he has all this lucky stuff.”

During regular story times, crafts were often designed to follow preset construction sequences, and the children’s versions differed very little from the template. However, crafts at Wrestling Club had a much richer dimension. For example, after the discussion about CM Punk’s tattoos, the children decorated cardboard torsos with symbols from the photographs as well as symbols of their own (Figure 4). Many of them drew the Pepsi logo on their torsos, though they placed it in different locations.



Figure 4: Sam’s prototype of a wrestler’s tattooed torso (left) and children working on their own cutouts using photos of real tattoos (right) at Fleetwood

After the story time featuring the wrestler Triple H, Sam gave the children a three-foot-tall cardboard H, which they decorated with images and slogans, using colored markers as well as photos and graphics clipped from magazines. In creating their designs, children often merged their own drawings and writing with the images Sam provided. Figure 5 shows a redesign of the logo for D-Generation X, one of Triple H’s wrestling alliances, by a nine-year-old boy. Another shows Triple H spewing water in the air with the child’s drawing spreading out from the photo onto the poster.



Figure 5: Crafts from the Triple H Wrestling Club: a cutout D-Generation X logo (upper left), a redesigned D-Generation X logo (lower left), and a modified photo of Triple H (right)

The pleasure of knowing things

At times, the connections to school-based literacy practices were explicit. Children matched answers to questions written on the answer board. They printed on tattooed torsos and banners. They placed pennies on the names of wrestlers on their bingo sheets after the matching names were called. At its heart, though, the club featured the pleasurable group activity of sharing and demonstrating knowledge. Wrestling Club meetings often culminated in the viewing of a classic wrestling match, during which participants used their new knowledge. Sam noted, “I feel that because we read the book, the kids can see how much more we are enjoying the match. They know the names of the moves because we read about them. They know who the wrestlers are fighting because they read about them.”

At the CM Punk meeting, the children watched a fight between CM Punk and Jeff Hardy, who had visited the library several months earlier. Sam set up the TV and then asked, “What moves are we looking for?” The children started calling them out: “Go to Sleep” and “Anaconda Vise,” for CM Punk, and “Twist of Fate” and “Swanton Bomb,” for Hardy. As the video began, the children

discussed the themes of the match buildup—why the wrestlers were mad at each other, who hit the referee at one point, and who was in the Hall of Fame.

Then Sam asked each person, including me, who they were rooting for. As we watched the match, we each person explained our allegiance, basing our reasons on personal experience, preferences for a style of wrestling, and our affinity for the personas that the wrestlers developed. One of the boys, who liked both Jeff Hardy and CM Punk, said he was going to be Jeff CM when he grew up. Sam asked him if he’d be a face or heel, and he said, “A face.” Another said that Jeff Hardy was his favorite because he met Hardy at the library, while another boy said that he favored CM Punk because of his “straight edge” message. For the children, the act of watching the match thus became a process of identifying values and using their knowledge to position themselves in a social exchange.

Frequently, several children pursued conversations about wrestling after the club meeting had ended and Sam had cleaned up and moved on to other library duties. After one Wrestling Club session, Sam told the children that the next month’s wrestler was Bret Hart, who would also be signing autographs after the local minor league baseball team’s home game. The Reading Phillies were also sponsoring a writing contest in the library, and children could win tickets. Two of the boys went back to the crafts table to keep working on their posters, and Sam joined them to clean up. One of them asked about the contest. Sam said, “You know how he says, ‘I’m the best that is, was, and ever will be’? There will be a writing contest to come up with three facts that prove that statement. For example, you could say he was a Triple Crown Champion.” She explained that the facts could come from books at the library or the Internet. One of the boys asked if he could start on the paper. Sam said that would be okay, and she stayed at the crafts table for a while, chatting for another 15 minutes about wrestling. As she told me afterwards, the boys would be doing research, but doing it “painlessly.”

Turning islands of expertise into worlds of knowledge

Langer (2011) describes the creation of knowledge as the process of building “envisionments,” or worlds of knowledge in the mind that comprise what we know about certain topics, such as a particular principle of mathematics, the function of the nervous system, or the causes of the Trojan War. These envisionments are open to growth and testing as they are fed. According to Langer, they are made deeper and more complex as “people learn to focus on a topic, to narrow on what is relevant as they search for and consider ideas and evidence pertaining to that topic” (p. 2). It’s a process of making sense of something through searching, judging, and selecting.

In Langer’s view, academic literacy relies on literate thinking, which involves using reasoning abilities, skills, and strategies to reflect on the meaning of texts and symbols, gain understanding, and build knowledge. Langer (2011) argues that “literate thinking can take place around any set of signs and symbols within a society” (p. 13). The interactions around wrestling topics that formed

the core of Wrestling Club reflected such a process of gaining, weighing, and sharpening knowledge by comparing new information with what one already knows, discussing ideas with others, and reacting to their perspectives. Wrestling provided a point of reference for children to take on certain habits of mind in thinking about and using knowledge.

Wrestling Club presented challenging concepts and compelling stories. It gave the children the opportunity for sustained, intense interactions with an adult who shared their interest. Just as crucially, the club provided what Wells (2009) calls “a wider range of opportunities for meaning-making and mastery” (p. 75). Children were masters of the topic, so Wrestling Club permitted them to experience immediate and repeated success in their attempts to answer questions, start conversations, and create artifacts they were proud of. There was little fear of failure in these efforts; the children felt competent and accepted in a context of complex activities and communication. Individuals were recognized and celebrated for their often arcane knowledge and the associations they could make with new content. The rewards of this mastery were made possible by the islands of expertise that many of these children had already formed around professional wrestling.

The program provided space for more intense serve-and-return exchanges than typical story times afford, and the content of each part of the program was used as a catalyst for conversation. The responses that the children received to their questions and comments expanded on what they said and encouraged a back-and-forth interaction. Wrestling Club altered the way children participated in story time. They became members of a group who spent two hours or more together when they met, and their opinions and contributions affected how the program developed. In this way, a program like Wrestling Club counters the insinuation of the theory of children’s learning that underpins standards-based reform (which is centered on the efficient accomplishment of specific tasks and focuses on assessment-driven outcomes) into library rhetoric and practice.

Public libraries in Pennsylvania are increasingly under pressure to construct their children’s programs around the learning standards distributed by the state’s Department of Education, which houses the Office of Commonwealth Libraries. Standards-based reform ideas have been part of the paradigm shift in American education policy since the 1980s, but they have only been a concern of public libraries during the last ten years. The Office of Commonwealth Libraries included the standards among the guidelines for determining “best practice” and sent libraries a checklist that they could use to indicate which of the standards were being met by their programs. Libraries that followed these guidelines were eligible for best practice awards, and as one administrator noted, “The money follows the measurement.”

Wrestling Club demonstrates that nonschool settings like libraries can fashion programming for children that builds on their interests, honors their desires, and grants them autonomy in their learning, while at the same time contributing knowledge and tools that children can use in formal schooling. Wrestling Club gave opportunities for children to grow more curious, informed, and

skillful because the library joined the children on their island of expertise. These islands can also be used to build bridges to academic literacy. Wrestling Club promoted enculturation to forms of literacy that anticipate the specialist varieties of language and to the social and disciplinary conventions that surround schooling and proliferate in later grades.

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